BROOKINGS

COMMENTARY

Lessons for the next India-Pakistan war

There are at least four dynamics coming into view that will shape the nature of future crises.

Joshua T. White

May 14, 2025

After several days of strikes and counterstrikes, the fragile ceasefire between India and Pakistan, brokered by the United States, appears for the moment to be holding. Already, both sides are telling self-justifying, bravado-laden stories—of varying credibility—about what they gained. They are also beginning to assert with retrospective confidence that they were carefully managing the risks of a wider war to avoid unexpected escalation.

We should take such claims with considerable skepticism. Much of what unfolded over the last few days appears to have been improvisational and opportunistic, and produced a battlefield environment that was at times frighteningly opaque, particularly for a conflict involving two nuclear powers. While many basic facts about this conflict remain obfuscated by the fog of war, it is becoming clear that this was the most dangerous India-Pakistan crisis in a quarter century.

It is too early to comprehensively assess what this means for India, Pakistan, and the region. But I think there are at least four dynamics coming into view that will shape the nature of future crises. First, the global debate on “attribution” has tilted decisively in India’s favor, but in ways that may exacerbate political pressures to react hastily following future terrorist attacks. Second, the two militaries have set troubling new precedents about target selection that will influence military planning and could raise the stakes for a future war. Third, information operations appear to be moving from the periphery to the center of wartime planning, particularly within the Pakistani defense establishment. And fourth, the widespread use of drones and loitering munitions has

complicated how both militaries interpret the escalation ladder. Each of these developments could make the next crisis more unpredictable than the one we just experienced.

Beyond attribution

This conflict began as most India-Pakistan crises have for three decades: a terrorist attack in India. On April 22, gunmen brutally massacred twenty-five Hindu tourists and a Muslim tour guide in Pahalgam. India quickly and credibly claimed that the attacks were carried out by a front group affiliated with the terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), while Pakistani sources asserted, implausibly, that it was a false flag operation.

It is striking that, in the wake of this horrific event, there has been remarkably little focus on exactly who carried out these attacks, or the precise nature of the assailants' links to the Pakistani state. The reason for this is simple: the United States and India's other key partners have, over the last decade, largely adopted New Delhi's approach of imputing culpability for terrorist attacks to Pakistan, based on a long-standing pattern of Pakistani support to anti-India militancy rather than on publicly disclosed evidence.

This evolution is in part the fruit of a successful Indian effort to move its partners beyond the need to deeply interrogate questions of attribution—and to label calls for investigation as mere dilatory attempts. The United States' prolonged exposure to Pakistan-based terrorist groups, and India's growing appeal as a strategic and trade partner to countries around the world, no doubt also contributed to this evolving dynamic.

That India is now granted this presumption by its partners is extremely valuable, as it gives New Delhi space to act more rapidly and decisively against Pakistan in response to any future terrorist attack on its soil. But it also conditions domestic opinion-makers to believe that attribution should happen with a kind of pro forma automaticity. The Indian leadership may have successfully predisposed its friends to Pakistan's inherent guilt, but it now has to more actively manage the expectations of its own people, who assume that the first order reaction to terrorism is not attribution but retaliation.

Indian leaders appear willing to accept these pressures as the price of avoiding public litigation about the exact nature of terrorists' links to the Pakistani state. One cannot blame them. The Pakistani military has allowed a welter of militant and terrorist groups to operate largely unimpeded on its soil. As I describe in my new book, "Vigilante Islamists," these groups have complex links with both Pakistani political parties and state institutions, and operate on the same ideological wavelength as the army's own leadership. The patterns of state cooperation with these groups are strikingly visible, but the details of any single operational partnership are often difficult to trace.

By working to neutralize the attribution question, Indian leaders have limited Pakistan's ability to delay, deny, or internationalize the next crisis. But they may, in the process, have made it more difficult to dampen jingoistic media calls for swift and decisive retaliation.

Targeting concerns

Both sides also have reason to worry about what the targeting precedents from this conflict might mean for escalation risks in the next one. India's opening salvos hit Muridke—LeT's well-known headquarters—and a major Jaish-e-Mohammed complex in Bahawalpur. Those strikes told a clear story of proportionality: terrorist bases for terrorist violence. But they also exhausted two of the most symbolic, politically sellable sites that had long been on India's short-list.

Should another attack occur, New Delhi may feel compelled to reach deeper into its playbook, and deeper into Pakistan, to find sites with comparable political and operational value. Instead of terrorist infrastructure, they might feel pressure to target second-tier Pakistani intelligence or military facilities, or might combine counterterrorist strikes with special operations or naval activities to demonstrate seriousness. Each of these options, and others like it, is fraught with new risks.

Pakistan likely comes away from this conflict with a different but symmetric concern. Indian weapons not only crossed the international border but also demonstrated accuracy against defended sites. The Indian Air Force was able to strike Nur Khan air base in Rawalpindi—not far from Pakistan's army headquarters—and other key airfields. Although damage appears limited, the choice of targets signaled India's willingness to challenge Pakistan's air defenses and to threaten assets close to the heart of the state.

Militaries grow anxious when their air defense systems are targeted, as this raises the specter of losing control of critical command nodes, or of misreading a limited strike as preparation for something larger. These anxieties may well shape Pakistani doctrine going forward, nudging it toward earlier mobilization and, paradoxically, faster escalation in a future conflict.

Information operations

One of the professional hazards of being a defense scholar is having to read shelves' worth of foreign military journals and sifting the legitimate doctrinal developments from voluminous amounts of triumphalism. Over the last decade, I have found Pakistani defense journals to be replete with articles about information warfare. I had largely dismissed this writing as trendy groupthink, or perhaps as an attempt to mimic the more subtle Chinese writings about "informationized warfare." But I may have been wrong.

It seems the Pakistani military made significant efforts to shape the information environment. Several of these were relatively sophisticated, such as Pakistan's denials of striking India on the night of May 8-9 which, in the midst of the growing crisis, introduced real puzzles about the direction and proportionality of the subsequent Indian retaliation. Other attempts, however, were absurdist, such as official Pakistani claims ↗ that Indian ballistic missiles were aimed at Sikh population centers ↗ in Punjab, an evident attempt to exploit communal sensitivities.

Indian official accounts also sought to shape the information environment, but were considerably more ponderous and reactive, with press briefings often lagging events by hours. Into that vacuum poured a hyper-competitive Indian media ecosystem, which blithely reported wild rumors that Karachi's port had been destroyed ↗, and that Pakistan's army chief was under house arrest. Such exaggerations seem comical in retrospect, but in the moment, they risked adding pressure on decisionmakers to act more assertively or sending confusing messages to Pakistani planners.

We should not exaggerate the impact of this cacophony of misinformation on the actual conduct of military operations. War is inherently confusing. But it would be unwise to see this merely as an incremental shift. Pakistan's increasingly aggressive information efforts, combined with India's frenetic and unusually irresponsible media environment, create new and significant risks for miscalculation in future crises.

The drone wars

Perhaps the most consequential military development of this crisis was the widespread use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and loitering munitions. Defense officials from both governments claim that hundreds of drones—ranging from small quadcopters to longer-endurance combat platforms—were launched over four nights, many on one-way missions. For the first time, India and Pakistan fought what looked like a mutual drone war, with probing missions, strikes, interceptions, and spoofing attacks occurring almost continuously.

The widespread use of UAVs in this conflict should not have come as a surprise, given the close attention both militaries have paid to the lessons of the Ukraine war. But the development is troubling for two reasons. First, many of these UAVs were deliberately "attritable," sent to probe enemy air defenses and prompt the costly use of air defense munitions. This is a sensible use of small or expendable platforms, but as noted earlier, targeting air defense radars and batteries can be read as a provocative action that might presage preparations for a deeper assault on an adversary's territory.

Second, we saw in this conflict what seems to be an emerging hierarchical "grammar" of escalation. Artillery, which is quite commonly exchanged in retaliatory volleys across the contested Line of Control, is not particularly escalatory. Ballistic missiles and—perhaps just a half-step below, cruise missiles—are at the other end of the spectrum due to their speed and destructive power and for the ways that they might foreshadow nuclear mobilization. UAVs and loitering munitions occupy a murky middle ground.

The extensive nighttime use of UAVs and loitering munitions was not received by either military with extreme alarm, which suggests that these systems might have broad and relatively non-escalatory utility in future conflicts. However, each country spoke rather indiscriminately and at times imprecisely about "missiles" and "drones," opening up considerable space for confusion. A future drone strike that disables a critical radar or air defense system could trigger disproportionate retaliation, particularly in a chaotic environment of misinformation.

Lessons learned

Both sides will seek to quickly learn and incorporate lessons from this conflict for future procurements and operational plans. Pakistan will likely double down on its deep integration with the Chinese industrial base, along with its partnerships with Turkey for UAVs. At first blush, the Pakistan Air Force seems to have performed relatively well in air-to-air combat, though some of its successes may be attributable to ground-based air defense systems postured along the border that targeted Indian fighters in their own airspace. The battle damage assessments may raise questions, however, about the scale and reliability of Pakistan's deeper air defense systems, as well as the utility of launching a high volume of drones that appear to have produced only modest damage within India.

India faces a more complicated set of choices. Its air defense networks seem to have performed quite well, and its military showed that it could reach into Pakistan with a combination of air- and ground-launched strikes. But this crisis should raise concerns in New Delhi about the need for considerably deeper reserves of missiles and munitions for a sustained conflict, and also the need to coordinate what could evolve into a multi-front confrontation.

As it now stands, Indian forces juggle what I have called (https://www.brookings.edu/articles/after-the-foundational-agreements-an-agenda-for-us-india-defense-and-security-cooperation/) a "motley force" of Israeli drones, Russian and Indian air-defense systems, French fighters, American surveillance aircraft, indigenously built UAVs, and a host of other platforms. Integrating this force into a single, networked battlespace across two continental fronts and a vast maritime theater is fast becoming India's central modernization challenge. This should raise the pressure on the Indian establishment to focus its sprawling defense indigenization efforts on a few more carefully targeted investments.

It will also provide fodder for Indian debates about high-profile procurements. Would adding new (battle-tested) Russian air defense or (untested) Russian fifth-generation fighter platforms to the mix be compatible with building out an extensive and resilient networked warfare environment that includes high-end Western equipment? Or would adopting advanced U.S. platforms such as the F-35 fighter grant unacceptable leverage over India's security to the United States, particularly in light of President Donald Trump's comments ↗ linking bilateral trade to a ceasefire?

Finally, we should anticipate that both countries' armies and navies will spend considerable time figuring out how they avoid standing on the sidelines of the next

conflict. This time, thankfully, these forces were kept on alert but largely in reserve. But it is not too early to worry that the combination of new norms on attribution, the precedents set by provocative targeting, the chaotic information warfare environment, and new drone technologies could make for a crisis that escalates even more quickly and opaquely than this one, with a wider configuration of fronts and greater destructive capabilities.

AUTHOR

Joshua T. White Nonresident Fellow - Foreign Policy, Center for Asia Policy Studies @joshuatwhite

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